

COMMERCE COMMISSION SUBMISSION: FAIRFAX - NZME PROPOSED MERGER

Jonathan Milne, Fairfax Sundays editor

25 November 2016

Let me introduce myself: my name is Jonathan Milne. I am an Auckland father-of-three. I am a journalist. And I am editor of the Sunday Star-Times, the Sunday News and much of the content that Fairfax publishes on Stuff at the weekend. All these hats teeter precariously atop my head, as I explain why the merger of Fairfax and NZME would, in my view, serve quality journalism and the public interest in New Zealand.

On Sunday just been, we launched a big campaign to support families walking their kids to school, getting them out of the cars and reducing school run congestion. It was led by the Sunday Star-Times, Neighbourly and Stuff. It was backed by numerous Fairfax community papers and 4Kids magazine, and endorsed by well-known opinion leaders throughout New Zealand, including some from TVNZ, MediaWorks and NZME.

It won't break the internet. It may not sell a single newspaper. It won't drive TV or radio ratings. But I hope it may just help make our communities better and healthier places to live - and the feedback I've had from hundreds of people supports that view.

This matters, because it is evidence that important, quality journalism is driven more by journalists who believe in what they're doing, than by competition.

This is not an isolated example: In New Zealand, I have worked across both APN (as it was then) and Fairfax, and I take great pride in some of the journalism we have done. Our investigations have held powerful people and institutions to account. Our campaigns have supported New Zealand communities to drive their own change.

As acting editor or deputy editor at the Herald on Sunday, I led our successful Two Drinks Max campaign to lower the drink-drive limit and encourage people to watch how much they drank before driving, and I led our Sideline Champs campaign to improve players' and supporters' behaviour as grassroots sports game. As editor of the Sunday Star-Times, I have led campaigns for disclosure of political donations, and for water safety.

I can point to many other recent examples of important public interest journalism: I think of the work the Herald has done to combat bullying, Fairfax's Faces of Innocents campaign for abused children, RNZ's investigations into shonky steel and housing shortages, TVNZ's investigation into the Saudi sheep deal, and the work by the Herald and MediaWorks to overturn Teina Pora's conviction. I know the journalists behind all of these - and not one of these pieces of journalism was motivated by the expectation of sales or ratings or clicks.

My celebration of the quality of New Zealand journalism may sound self-aggrandising. But I have worked closely with other professions, where I have seen the same personal commitment by those who care: doctors, teachers, lawyers whose representation of unpopular causes often wins them few fans.

I have also seen bad doctors, incompetent teachers, corrupt lawyers - and yes, poor journalism. Like those other professions, the strongest critics of poor journalism are other journalists. We are an industry that, mostly, self-regulates well - regardless of competitive imperatives.

I believe good journalism can make a difference. I hope that in my stints editing all three of New Zealand's Sunday papers, I have been a relentless, stubborn, often aggravating champion of quality journalism.

As will be apparent, I care about newspapers. Newspaper ink, as they say, runs in my veins. I am enormously proud of the work we have done at the three newspapers I have led, the Herald on Sunday, the Sunday Star-Times and the Sunday News.

But more important than that, I care about journalism. And I urge the Commission to not confuse the two. I have helped launch and build newspapers. The day may come when I play my part in shutting down newspapers.

I will always fight to protect the journalism, though. Sometimes that fight will be against external challengers, and to that end I have been summonsed before Parliament's Privileges Committee and refused to name my sources; I have stood as a witness in the District and High Courts and fended off attempts to compromise the whistleblowers and other informants.

Just as often, the challenges are internal - and I can tell you, I have seen robust debates in every newsroom in which I have worked, over ethics, over legality, over the human decency of our journalism. Often, we fight for incremental but nonetheless important change: I remember when I was a junior Maori issues reporter at The Dominion in the 1990s, arguing with the editor about the use of the letter "s" to pluralise Maori words. To most of our readers, it was an insignificant matter, but to a couple of Wellington iwi, the eventual change was a sign of our respect for Maori.

Similarly, we have not been afraid to publish a range of views within our media organisations. As an example, as Sunday Star-Times editor I have been supportive of the proposed merger, but some of our staff and columnists, like business writer Rod Oram, have opposed it.

We welcome that, and I hope the range of views from within Fairfax and NZME will be well represented in the submissions before you.

My point being, quality journalism, public interest journalism, a plurality of views, are driven more by conscience than by competition. The number of New Zealand media owners may be reduced by one, but our commitment to quality journalism will continue.

None of us got into this game for the money. Naively (perhaps), idealistically (probably), we signed up for journalism school because we thought we could make a difference - and that is something our journalists remind us of, should there ever be a danger of us becoming jaded.

I support the proposed merger. But I offer you this assurance: regardless of your decision, good journalists will continue to do good journalism to the very best of their ability.

I do fear, though, that without the step change of the merger, we will struggle to maintain the scale and resources that help us in the small market that is New Zealand.

If you decline to approve this merger, you will not protect the status quo. That status quo is unsustainable. To protect quality, public interest journalism from the threat posed by international digital aggregators like Google and Facebook, I believe we need a big and brave and innovative solution. I believe this merger is our best chance.

Finally, wearing my hat as an editor or acting editor, at different times, of all three of New Zealand's Sunday papers, I would point out that these papers are more different than you might have realised.

Each has its own audience, defined by far more than just geography:


- The Herald on Sunday is a popular, mass-market paper that hits the news hard and makes entertainment fun. Its readers demand a sharp, concise, agenda-setting read.
- The Sunday News is about family, about community, about sport. It is New Zealand's oldest Sunday paper, with readers who have picked up their loyalty to the paper from their parents and grandparents. Many would never switch to another Sunday paper.
- The Sunday Star-Times is New Zealand's national paper, with a higher representation of readers who demand in-depth and intelligent analysis - law-makers, business leaders, health professionals, scientists and engineers, lawyers, teachers and academics. This is reflected in high-end brand advertising in its news pages and in the glossy Sunday magazine.

With the efficiencies that might be achieved in the back-room, through a merger, there is every reason to believe that these unique brands could be preserved for longer than we might otherwise have anticipated, should our readers and advertisers demand it.

For me, and for so many of the other good journalists with whom I have worked in New Zealand, what gets us out of bed in the morning is doing quality journalism that makes a difference.

I urge you to support us in this by approving the proposed Fairfax-NZME merger.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Milne
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